

Practice Boat Safety (June 17, 2005)

"Boat Smart. Boat Safe. Wear It."

With summer's official start on June 21, many Southwest Virginia residents may be taking advantage of the warm, sunny weather to enjoy our region's beautiful lakes and rivers with a boat ride. Unfortunately, recently released statistics from the U.S. Coast Guard reveal that there were 703 recreational boating fatalities on the water in 2003. Of those fatalities, 86 percent were not wearing their life jackets. Fatal accident data analysis shows that approximately 416 of the lives lost could have been saved if boaters had worn their life jackets.

Much of boating safety is common sense, but it is important for every boater, whether the operator or a passenger, to learn and understand the basic boating safety rules so as to minimize risks and liabilities while maximizing the enjoyment of the water. In an effort to educate boaters regarding boating safety, the U.S. Coast Guard and several boating organizations have launched the 2005 North American Safe Boating Campaign to communicate the importance of wearing a life jacket through the message: "Boat Smart. Boat Safe. Wear It." Below are some common sense boat safety tips that all of us should follow:

Boat with Knowledge. An easy and efficient way to learn about boat safety is to take a boating course. Many boating courses are offered for all types of recreational boaters and for boaters of all ages. Qualified volunteer organizations, such as the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, U.S. Power Squadron, and others sponsor many courses, and many state boating agencies also provide classes.

Boat with Wisdom. Wearing a life jacket is the easiest way to prevent a boating fatality. Life jackets come in many styles designed for a variety of activities, are colorful, comfortable and will provide the protection needed if capsizing or falling overboard occurs. The majority of fatalities from these types of mishaps could have been avoided by simply wearing a life jacket. Make sure that each person's device is size appropriate, U.S. Coast Guard approved and in good condition.

Boat with Preparedness. Having all of the proper safety equipment when boating can make a big difference in an emergency situation. The type of equipment required will vary with different types of boats and outings, but some important items to always have on board are: life jackets for each person on board, a throwable personal flotation device, fire extinguisher, running lights, sound signaling device and visual distress signals such as flares

Boat with Experience. It is important for boat operators to be aware of, and follow, the "rules of the road." Boat operators have the responsibility of maneuvering a boat in a safe manner and taking appropriate action to avoid collision, in accordance with navigation rules.

Boat with Discretion. When planning a boating trip, weather should be a primary consideration. Check weather conditions for the area in which the boating trip is planned before leaving for the destination, and always keep an eye to the sky when on the water. Forecasts, although helpful, can sometimes change. Squalls and thunderstorms can quickly approach and create a dangerous situation. If trapped on the water during a storm, make sure all passengers are wearing a life jacket, reduce the boat's speed and head toward the nearest safe shore or harbor.

Boat with Caution. An easy safety precaution to take before a boating trip is to file a float plan. A written float plan records the planned boating destination and return time. Complete a detailed float plan which includes the name and contact information of the boat operator and all passengers, a description of the boat and the towing vehicle, boating departure and destination locations and emergency contact information. Leave the float plan with a responsible person prior to launching, and remember to contact that individual following a safe return.

Boat with Judgement. A boat operator is likely to become impaired more quickly from the use of alcohol than a driver of an automobile, drink for drink. Many factors impact an individual when boating. Sun, wind, noise, vibration from the boat, motion and dehydration all act as stressors to the body when boating. These stressors can negatively affect a person's balance, vision, coordination and judgement. When alcohol is added to the situation, all of the negative side effects can be seriously magnified.

These basic safety guidelines can help to ensure an enjoyable and safe boating excursion. For more information on boating safety, visit the U.S. Coast Guard website at uscgboating.org.